

History 211 History of US Elections
Discussion Transcript for October 29, 2020
Election of 1932

Main Readings: O'Mara (chapter 4) and Kaplan post

FDR's victory in 1932 was not just the result of an electorate upset over the deepening Great Depression. Rather it was a more complex triumph that owed a great deal to campaign innovation, some of it born out of the necessity of his paralysis. Here is a selection of student comments.

FDR VS HOOVER

STUDENT COMMENT: "STUDENT COMMENT: "Among the more significant ways in which Franklin D. Roosevelt and his platform helped change future presidential campaigns is through the deployment of what O'Mara identifies as "stagecraft, strategy, and a new breed of campaign advisors" (103). Disabled by polio, Roosevelt and his advisors worked to alter his public appearance and immediately aimed to "dispel rumors that [he] was too disabled to do the job" (86). By "stagecraft," O'Mara was referring not only to Roosevelt's interactions with the press (and the way in which he was displayed in the media) but also to Roosevelt's public persona. He worked to develop strategies to "mask the fact that he could not walk," while simultaneously portraying his ability to successfully fulfill his role as president of the United States (if so elected) (86). Rather than aligning publicly with one party (although clearly more liberally based as evidenced by the development of his so-called "Brain Trust"), Roosevelt developed a successful "strategy" by straying over party lines and developing speeches and ideas that best appealed to his audiences. O'Mara alludes to the effectiveness of this strategy by quoting the New York Times: "He would unite East and West, North and South" (90-91). Lastly, Roosevelt's campaign advisors altered his campaign significantly. Advisors like Jim Farley became essential to Roosevelt's campaign because they helped Roosevelt "appeal to groups that previously had voted Republican" (103). It was the combination of stagecraft, strategy, and his advisors that helped Roosevelt to develop the well-structured campaign that he did, and which later led to his nomination as president."

STUDENT COMMENT: "The concept of altering a presidential candidate's image did not begin in 1932, but that year it became exceedingly relevant in a way that had not happened before. The Roosevelt campaign understood this fact and devoted much of their energy in cultivating Roosevelt's image. Their campaign's hyperawareness of image originally stemmed from an effort to show that FDR's disability from Polio would not hinder his performance as president through a vigorous campaign trail and from press operative Louis Howe's dealings with publications and physicians to put out stories that would help Roosevelt's image of health. Though Hoover may have been a master of media 15 years past, his campaign did not recognize the importance of image and that "his ideology and approach were inadequate to [...] reassure a traumatized public." (O'Mara, 103). While Roosevelt was promising a "new deal for the American people" (95) with great emotional fervor, Hoover's speeches were much more combative and explanative, making his campaign on the whole "depressing, dogmatic,

and dull" (97). This tone of Hoover's speech was even more detrimental due to the popularization of the home radio. Whereas Roosevelt used the radio and other new media more often to convey his message of a new deal and hope, Hoover used it more sparingly, and with such a dull and depressing message he left his radio audiences unsatisfied with his image. Overall, a huge component of FDR's win in 1932 was his ability to capture new media in a way that cultivated a public image of hope and strength, while Hoover ultimately failed to recognize the importance of this new campaign style and lost for it."

STUDENT COMMENT: "In 1932, Franklin Delano Roosevelt ran a far more effective campaign than the incumbent president Herbert Hoover, as he formed a distinct message, used the media to amplify it, and managed to form a new and lasting coalition which would benefit Democrats for decades to come. Unlike Hoover, who campaigned little, Roosevelt was a natural campaigner who was charismatic. He canvassed the country giving stump speeches, and in the final weeks, he even rode a campaign train known as the "Roosevelt Special", giving speeches off of the back balcony (86). His speeches, both at the convention and on the stump, focused on optimistic yet vague economic promises and making Roosevelt appear likable, unlike Hoover and Republicans, who did not dwell on economic issues. Roosevelt's campaign messages were carefully crafted by policy advisors who, unlike in the past, were full-time, professional campaign operatives deeply loyal to Roosevelt (75). In addition, Roosevelt was aided by speechwriters, for which he was ridiculed by Hoover (85). Roosevelt appealed to the heart, whereas Hoover appealed to the head (Ibid). Though Hoover had been a master of marketing earlier in his career as head of the U.S. Food Administration, he failed to adapt to new media such as radio, which were now commonly found in American's homes. Hoover was offered ten minute radio segments to be broadcast from the White House, but felt the length of time was insufficient (Ibid). As a technocrat, he was always caught up in details and specifics, and thus, struggled to connect with the people. Roosevelt, on the other hand, used the radio to his advantage. He broke tradition by appearing at the Democratic Convention in Chicago and delivering an acceptance speech full of energy and economics, which was broadcast via radio. Most importantly, throughout the campaign he was able to portray an empathetic tone that was presented through "his elegant phrasing and rhetoric" (86). As O'Mara puts it, "The media had become the message" (Ibid)."

STUDENT COMMENT: "Hoover had the opportunity to speak to a large national audience in a 'Fireside Chat' style of radio program, but he turned it down based on the time constraints. Roosevelt fully embraced the radio and used it to speak directly to the American people. Though policy was not the primary focus, Roosevelt used his emotional appeals alongside focusing on the terrible economic situation to attach a feeling of hope to his name on the ballot. While Hoover was violently cracking down on WWI veterans, FDR was going across the country and spreading hope. This form of appealing emotionally to the citizens became a tool for later campaigns, especially against incumbents with national crisis. It is a simple fact that the candidate with the best policy will generally lose against a more likeable, charismatic candidate."

MODERN-DAY COMPARISONS

STUDENT COMMENT: “Roosevelt’s path to the presidency in 1932 appears remarkably similar to the obstacles Joe Biden has faced throughout the 2020 race thus far. According to H.L. Mencken, “a majority of the Roosevelt men are really not for Roosevelt at all, but simply against Al Smith.” For Biden, that same form of support has come from Democrats across the camps of his many primary rivals as well as Never-Trumpers. They also both received significant boosts in support when their main Democratic rivals (Smith to Roosevelt and Sanders to Biden) endorsed the nominees, transferring their bases in a consolidation of support. Both men also faced accusations and speculation about their fitness for office. For Roosevelt, questions and doubts came from many Americans about his physical ability and stamina, including directly from Hoover. For Biden, his mental acuity has been questioned time after time by Trump and his base. However, both men also hired successful campaign managers and advisors to push fit, engaging, empathetic versions of themselves in the press.”

STUDENT COMMENT: “ Leah Kaplan’s article on “1932 Election Day Voter Fraud” highlights the election’s forgotten candidate, Norman Thomas, and the disregarding of votes. Norman Thomas was the Socialist candidate, and his message was to change the economy and supply federal aid to citizens. Thomas gained close to a million votes, but Democrats and Republican parties’ district leaders did not count the third party votes. The miscounting of the third party votes touches on an important issue the 2020 election is currently facing. States are now deciding if mail-in ballots votes that were sent in the past election day, they may or may not count. President Trump believes that districts need to disregard those votes; however, due to the Coronavirus pandemic, many voters cannot vote in person and are sending in the mail-in ballots. Every vote needs to be accounted for, but sadly this election may change that freedom. As the election grows closer, it will be a pivotal moment in U.S history if not every vote gets counted and matters.”